

The Rhetoric of Music in Dante's *Purgatorio*

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Dante's *Purgatorio* is the only canticle of his *Divine Comedy* in which souls develop. Those appearing in the *Inferno* undergo constant and unchanging torture, while those in the *Paradiso* spend eternity gazing at God, neither needing nor wishing for change. By contrast, the preparatory stage of Purgatory contains souls aimed entirely at development: from sin to spotlessness, from distracted and tainted desire to longing for God alone. Dante names Purgatory “that second realm / where man's soul goes to purify itself / and become worthy to ascend to Heaven” (*Purgatorio* 1.4-6). It is a stage of education, whose every aspect should accelerate souls toward their meeting with the Divine in the *Paradiso*. Spiritual exercises such as penance, benediction, and prayer contribute to this education, but another more subtle influence present throughout is music. Music is an expression of praise that would benefit any spiritual journey, but perhaps more important is its potential for beauty which, as Plato explains, has a profound effect on the soul. In beauty the soul gets a glimpse of the transcendent and begins to grow in its desire for the truth, goodness, and beauty of its ultimate goal, the Divine. In his dialogue *The Phaedrus*, Plato explains the power of beauty. It reminds the soul, he says, of the perfection of pure reality, and inspires it to “swel[l] up and ach[e]” with desire (*Phaedrus* 251c). Beauty, by introducing us to the transcendent, cultivates our longing to approach it further. It has the ability to sharpen the soul's desire for reality, making it an essential part of any truth-seeking education.

Souls suffering in Dante's Purgatory are there, not because they lack love, but rather because the love they have is misdirected and misused. Virgil tells the Pilgrim Dante:

Neither Creator nor his creatures ever,
 my son, lacked love. There are, as you well know,
 two kinds: the natural love, the rational.
 Natural love may never be at fault;
 the other may: by choosing the wrong goal,
 by insufficient or excessive zeal. (*Purgatorio* 17.91-96)

Purgatory is intended to reorder the loves and focus the desires of misled souls until they learn habitually to prefer true goodness, rather than incomplete reflections of it. In the *Paradiso*, Beatrice explains that what propels Dante among the celestial spheres is his own newly purified desire to be near God (*Paradiso* 1.118-141). Such refinement of the desires calls especially for the aid of music, the beauty of which clarifies the soul's perception, aiding its ability to discern between goodness and corruption. Appropriately, hymns and chants appear throughout the *Purgatorio*. When Dante overhears a group of souls sing the *Agnus Dei*,¹ his guide Virgil tells him that "they are loosening the knot of Wrath" (*Purgatorio* 16.24). Bound by the knot of their habitual perversions, these sinful souls release themselves by exposure to music, allowing its ordered beauty to refine their perception of reality. Again, when he inquires about a group singing the *Labia Mea Domine*,² Dante receives the answer: "They may be shades / loosing the knot of their debt to God" (*Purgatorio* 23.14-15). By portraying the act of singing as one of liberation, the Poet implies the connection between music and the improvement of souls.

¹ "Lamb of God"

² The Latin is from Psalm 51: "Domine, labia mea aperies, et os meum adnuntiabit laudem tuam": Lord, open my lips; my mouth will proclaim your praise.

Plato places similar importance on the power of beauty when he describes its effect on humans in his *Phaedrus*. His character Socrates posits that the “best and noblest” inspiration is that “which someone shows when he sees the beauty we have down here and is reminded of true beauty” (*Phaedrus* 249e, 249d). Plato’s “true beauty” can be compared to Dante’s conception of the divine perfection, for both refer to some higher ideal that humans cannot grasp fully on this earth. For Plato, beauty reminds its viewers of transcendent reality, which causes them to “gaze aloft” in longing meditation (*Phaedrus* 249d). Aristotle also recognizes the connection between earthly beauty and transcendence, for he claims that to appreciate the beauty in an *image* of the truth is “something closely allied” to appreciating the beauty of the reality itself (*Politics* 8.5.1340a14). Understood thus, beauty can be expected to offer a strong assistance to Dante’s penitent souls by drawing their attention toward the heavens, their ultimate destination. It may even be the most powerful inspiration for souls, for, as Socrates explains, although ideals such as Justice and Goodness are lovely like Beauty, they are neither visible nor audible to humans. They do not kindle the immediate desire that beauty does. If wisdom could be seen, says Socrates, “it would awaken a terribly powerful love ...and the same goes for other objects of inspired love” (*Phaedrus*, 250d). However, according to Plato, “beauty alone has this privilege, to be the most clearly visible and the most loved” (*Phaedrus* 250d-e). This Platonic approach explains how the beautiful aspect of music, like prayer and penance, might accelerate spiritual development in Dante’s *Purgatorio* by encouraging penitent souls in their search for the perfect beauty of heaven.

Plato’s theory of beauty coincides with his and Aristotle’s insistence on the use of music in education, for if, by containing beauty, music sparks a desire for reality in the student, this

desire will intensify his or her search for truth. As Plato explains in his *Republic*, a person educated in music and poetry will

sense it acutely when something has been omitted from a thing.... And since he has the right distastes, he'll praise fine things, be pleased by them...and, being nurtured by them, become fine and good.... He'll rightly object to what is shameful, hating it... (*Republic* 3.401-402)

As part of an education, such as that in Dante's Purgatory, music teaches a habitual preference for the good and the true. Aristotle observes in his *Politics* that this art "possesses the power of producing an effect on the character of the soul" (*Politics* 8.5.1340b10) and that "the modes and rhythms of music have an affinity [with the soul], as well as a natural sweetness" (*Politics* 8.5.1340b10). Sweetness accompanies the wholesomeness of music, making it a pleasant influence, just as the pleasure of seeing beauty in Plato's account makes its effect all the stronger. The principle implied by both philosophers is the same: if a thing has goodness of form, then the pleasure of experiencing it will cultivate a natural association of goodness with pleasure. Accordingly, Aristotle concludes that "music should be regarded as something of an influence making for goodness, inasmuch as it has the power of giving a tone to our character...by habituating us to feel pleasure in the right sort of way" (*Politics* 8.5.1339a11). Education by music is a training of the soul's likes and dislikes, by which the student learns habitually to prefer the good over the bad, the true over the false. When it plays this role as part of the purgation in Dante's poem, music refines the desires by exciting them in pursuit of the "beatific vision," as Plato calls the sight of pure reality, their ultimate end.

As Mimi Stillman points out in "The Music of Dante's *Purgatorio*," the featured songs correspond to the vices of the souls singing them. She explains that "shades in each tier sing

passages from psalms and hymns that Dante chose for their capacity to help the souls expiate their specific sins” (Stillman 16). For example, souls suffering in the circle of Pride sing *Beati pauperes spiritu*,³ a hymn extolling the virtue of humility (*Purgatorio* 12.109-111). Similarly, envious souls sing *Beati Misericordes*,⁴ a chant that praises mercy, thus countering the hostility and hate inherent in envy (*Purgatorio* 15.37-39). It is clear that such chants and hymns are textually relevant to their purpose, but they are not made up of text alone. Rather, their musical setting represents an important element of their meaning and value.⁵ This is clear, in part, from their historical tradition since they were composed and accepted with the standard of “goodness of form,” or beauty, in mind. The Gregorian chants seen in Dante’s *Purgatorio* are part of the Roman Catholic Church’s heritage and were considered proper for her liturgy only so long as they retained three qualities: beauty, sanctity, and universality. Pope Pius X, for example, draws from the history of the Church’s liturgy when he says that all sacred music should “possess ... in particular sanctity and goodness of form, which will spontaneously produce the final quality of universality” (Tra le Solleccitudini, 2). Dante, writing within the Catholic tradition and citing its musical works, includes by association the standard that music should have goodness of form as well as edifying text. Musical beauty, as part of the education of the souls in the *Purgatorio*, accelerates them on their way to final satisfaction in their encounter with reality in the *Paradiso*.

³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit”

⁴ “Blessed are the merciful”

⁵ There are four types of chant setting, ranging from simple to elaborate. Recitative chant is very simple, with many syllables on the same note. This setting is used for the recitation of long texts, such as Gospel passages. Slightly more melodic is syllabic chant, in which one or two notes are used per syllable. Neumatic chant is more elaborate still, gracing many of its syllables with groups of two to four notes called “neumes.” Most elaborate, however, is melismatic chant. Here, long sections of melody appear sometimes on a single syllable. All of these types of chants, especially the neumatic and the melismatic, incorporate music, not as a mere medium for the text, but rather as a complement and addition to it. For example, the length of a melismatic interlude will often slow the progression of the chant, encouraging meditation upon the text in a way that merely speaking it would not. Thus, the musical language of a chant setting may add its own layer of meaning to the text.

Dante includes music in his *Purgatorio* as an educating influence, thus implying, as do Plato and Aristotle, that it has the power to refine the soul's affections and to cultivate its goodness. Music, beautiful music, appears in the poem as a presence that arrests the soul and instills in it a hunger for truth and goodness. As Dante portrays it, beauty cultivates in its hearers a *habit* of appreciating its goodness, reorienting their desires in the direction of Paradise. Dante's use of beautiful music as an education posits a model for all who are seeking truth. He demonstrates, in the *Purgatorio*, how the influence of beauty will excite the student's search for the truth and train his or her judgment in the discernment of good and bad, true and untrue, ugly and beautiful.

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